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SUBJECT: QUIET START TO OFFICIAL CAMPAIGN SEASON

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11. SUMMARY. The presidential and provincial council campaigns for the Aug. 20 election officially kicked off June 16, with a relatively subdued atmosphere in both Kabul and the outlying provinces. Major and minor candidates alike plastered Kabul streets with campaign posters, though few held large rallies or took to the airwaves. Campaigning was even quieter in the provinces, with informational election advertising from the Independent Election Commission far outnumbering partisan candidate materials. Representatives of major campaigns promised more visibility in the coming weeks.

Plenty of Posters ...

12. Kabul residents awoke June 16 to a city covered in campaign posters and fliers, in several places plastered haphazardly over street signs and other candidates' materials. President Karzai, Ashraf Ghani, and Mirwais Yaseni accounted for the most robust advertising efforts in the ethnically mixed, majority-Pashtun, and majority-Hazara neighborhoods visited by PolOff, though reports from Tajik neighborhoods cited heavy Abdullah Abdullah advertising as well. Of the lower-tier candidates, Sayed Jalal, Hedayat Arsala, and Shahla Atta made the most visible efforts to publicize their campaigns. Eccentric candidate and Lower House MP Ramazan Bashardost erected a giant banner outside his "office" (a tent across the street from Parliament) featuring his chosen ballot symbol, a dove on a green background. A handful of provincial council candidates also made efforts to join the advertising fray, though on a much smaller scale.

13. Less than two days into the campaign, many campaign materials showed signs of defacement, though observers were divided on whether the vandalism was random or the act of rival campaigns. One stretch of road near Kabul University was showered with dozens of Karzai posters featuring the president and his two running mates. Someone had meticulously removed the prominent nose from the image of 1st VP nominee Marshall Fahim in every poster. Shopkeepers and other property owners refrained from displaying campaign posters, leaving public spaces, intersections, and security barriers to host the majority of campaign materials. Expensive-looking Karzai banners adorned many city street lights, presumably placed there by municipal work crews. Taxi drivers choosing to display their allegiances with window posters appeared divided between Karzai and Abdullah.

... But Few Live Events

14. Despite the preponderance of posters, the candidates themselves kept low profiles. As the campaign kicked off, Karzai remained in Russia for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit, while other major candidates held - at most - small rallies in various Kabul neighborhoods. The

Ghani, Yaseni, and Abdullah campaigns said their candidates would wait another week or two before making appearances outside of Kabul, with most looking to focus on the north, Jalalabad, and Herat first.

15. Radio and TV airwaves were mostly devoid of partisan advertising, though one local staff reported seeing an Abdullah advertisement on Tolo TV. Several Afghan contacts confirmed hearing IEC-sponsored informational radio ads on a variety of channels. Karzai's absence from the country probably contributed to state-run media downplaying the start of the campaign. Yaseni and four minor candidates participated in a debate on Radio Azadi on the campaign's inaugural day. Candidates took questions from call-in listeners, who demanded more specific policy platforms. One caller asked the 1st VP running mate of former Army chief Shanawaz Tanai, who led a failed coup in 1990, whether "Tanai's new policies will include the killing of as many people as his old policies did."

Slow Start in the Provinces

16. PRTs reported a generally subdued campaign atmosphere outside of Kabul, with campaign materials and activities surfacing in only a few provinces. Nangarhar saw comparatively more action, with Karzai campaign manager and Kabul Governor Haji Din Mohammed organizing a 1,000-person rally in Jalalabad June 16. The PRTOff in Jalalabad also reported a small Abdullah rally and radio ads for both Karzai and Abdullah. The IEC's voter education posters shared display space in Herat with a smattering of candidates' campaign posters. Reports from Ghor, Kunar, Kunduz, Daikundi, Paktia, Panjshir, and Uruzgan showed little public activities in the first two days of campaigning, with

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presidential and provincial council candidates alike possibly waiting for more direction from Kabul-based campaign managers before taking their activities public.
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